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ABSTRACT

Andrews University, Michigan, developed the First Day of School Experience for preservice teachers, which coincides with the opening days of school in area K-12 public and private schools where preservice teachers are placed for their student teaching experiences. The program allows preservice teachers to develop competence in beginning the school year and confidence in their classroom management techniques. The process includes four phases: daily field experiences involving observation, assistance, and actual classroom teaching; daily university classroom instruction focusing on beginning the school year and classroom management; weekly conferences with an instructor to discuss progress; and individual reading, writing, and reflection. Students become acquainted with theory during classroom instruction and reading, while the field experiences allow them to combine theory and practice. Data were collected from preservice teachers' reflective journals, which chronicle their learning during this experience. The paper presents a collective story composed of the actual words and ideas from participating student teachers' journals. (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

Learning to Set the Stage

Rhoda C. Sommers

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Abstract

The first day of school sets the stage for the entire year, but little is currently being done to prepare preservice teachers for this crucial time. One university developed the First Days of School Experience to prepare its preservice teachers to begin the school year successfully. A collective story describes the experiences and reflections of preservice teachers participating in this experience.

Learning to Set the Stage

by Rhoda C. Sommers

Which is the most important day in a teacher's career? Graduation day marking the completion of numerous classes and hours of field experiences? Signing that first contract? The day a teacher retires? Is any one day really more noteworthy and deserving of extra thought and preparation?

The first day of each school year is a red letter day for teachers. During this day, the students' initial contact with the teacher, first impressions are formed which set the tone for the remainder of the school year (Brooks, 1985b; Huling-Austin & Emmer, 1985; Moskowitz & Hayman, 1976; Sprick, 1985; Wong & Wong, 1998). Students are busy sizing up the teacher to determine exactly what he or she is like and what to expect for the remainder of the year (Arends, 1998). It is the teacher's responsibility to determine what tone is set for the school year by carefully planning each activity for the first days and weeks of school. However, the topic of how to begin the school year successfully is seldom addressed during preservice teacher training (Brooks, 1985a; Schell & Burdy, 1992; Wong & Wong, 1998).

Emmer, Evertson, and Anderson (1980) conducted a study of 27 third grade classrooms. After collecting and analyzing data, teachers were divided into two categories, more effective managers and less effective managers. Researchers then analyzed the activities and behaviors of teachers in the two groups for the beginning of the school year. Differences between the two groups were most obvious in the areas of classroom rules and procedures, monitoring students, and delivering consequences. The more effective managers planned the first day for extensive contact with students and maintained control over students' behavior. During the first week they spent considerable time explaining and reminding students of the

classroom rules and procedures. Though they valued academic content, their major goal for the first weeks of school was to acclimate students to the classroom environment and social structure.

Another study conducted at the junior high level has similar findings (Emmer & Evertson, 1981). Data were gathered through classroom narrative records, time use logs, student engagement ratings, and ratings of teacher and student behavior. Teachers were then classified as more or less effective managers, and comparisons were made of teachers' behaviors and activities during the first three weeks of school. The more effective managers rated higher on clarity of giving directions and information, stating desired attitudes and behavior more frequently, providing activities and assignments with higher levels of student success, presenting clear expectations for work standards, and responding consistently to appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

When students enter the classroom on the first day of school, they have seven questions for their teacher (Brooks, 1985b). How a teacher chooses to address each of these questions will impact the entire school year and his or her relationship with the students. These questions are (1) Am I in the right room? (2) Where am I supposed to sit? (3) What are the rules of this teacher? (4) What will I be doing in this course? (5) How will I be evaluated? (6) Who is my teacher as a person? (7) Is the teacher going to be interested in me as an individual? (Brooks, 1985b).

The first day of school is also a crucial time for first year teachers to develop perceptions of themselves and their competence as teachers (Brooks, 1985a; Huling-Austin & Emmer, 1985). In order to face the first day with confidence, teachers require specific training in how to plan and structure this important time. If the profession is to keep competent first year teachers, preservice teachers need to be prepared to successfully begin the school year.

Though there are currently induction programs for first year teachers which address these issues, many novice teachers find themselves overwhelmed by all the new responsibilities and information which leads to difficulty processing, assimilating, and internalizing content (Huling-Austin & Emmer, 1985). Induction programs generally occur just prior to the beginning of the school year which immediately limits the amount of time first year teachers have to complete all that needs to be done to begin the school year successfully. Since preparing for the first day of school is merely one of myriads of tasks facing the first year teacher, adequate preparation can easily be overlooked.

One University's Story

What is it that preservice teachers need to experience and know in order to begin the school year successfully? In response to this question, Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan developed the First Days of School Experience for preservice teachers. This experience coincides with the opening days of school in area K-12 public and private schools where preservice teachers are placed for student teaching. The First Days of School Experience allows preservice teachers to develop competence in beginning the school year and confidence in classroom management. This process includes four phases: Daily field experiences involving observation, assistance, and actual classroom teaching; daily university classroom instruction focusing on beginning the school year and classroom management; weekly conferences with an instructor to discuss progress; and individual reading, writing, and reflection. Students become acquainted with theory during classroom instruction and reading while field experiences allow them to combine theory and practice. Through writing, reflection, and discussions with peers, supervising teachers, and instructors, students internalize learning.

What preservice teachers participating in the First Days of School Experience actually experience and discover is best heard through their own voices. During this experience, preservice teachers write weekly journals reflecting on activities in the university classroom, the K-12 classroom, their research reading, and conversations with other educators. These journals chronicle preservice teachers' learning. Preservice teachers, like classroom practitioners, are adept storytellers of their classroom experiences. Through the telling of their stories, teachers have the opportunity to relive the stories and restory their lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995). First Days of School Experience participants at Andrews University tell their stories, listen to others' stories, and then return to the K-12 classrooms to restory their experiences. Others too may participate in the First Days of School Experience by reading the following narrative and restorying their own first days of school experiences.

The narrative which follows is a collective story composed of actual words and ideas from the journals of First Days of School Experience participants. Is this an accurate and trustworthy account of preservice teachers' experiences during the First Days of School Experience? Richardson (1990) suggests asking participants to comment on the accuracy of a collective story. After reading the narrative, First Days of School participants observed that it is "accurate and interesting;" it "capture[s] the essence" of the experience; it is "wonderful to have our thoughts documented," and the narrative "represented many of my . . . feelings." These responses are an indication of the narrative's verisimilitude (Denison, 1996).

The First Days of School Experience

I arrived in Bell Hall with my usual first day of school jitters. Though I was a college senior and had survived many first days of school, the same questions

plagued me each year. Overshadowing my current fears and concerns was the realization that next fall, one mere year from now, I would be facing my first day of school as a teacher. Was I ready for a classroom of students expecting me to know what to do? Would I be able to manage a classroom of students on my own? How would I even know what to do to prepare for that fateful day?

My thoughts reverted abruptly to the present as my eyes focused on other faces in the hallway. I recognized other education majors from previous methods classes. Fleetinglly I wondered whether they too mourned over a summer vacation cut short for this class. Were those twinges of uncertainty and self-doubt mixed with hopeful anticipation I saw in their faces? What would this course, the First Days of School Experience, be like?

To my surprise, one of the instructors for the course met me at the door with a smile on his face, another instructor provided me with a name tag and gave me instructions for finding my seat, and a third instructor circulated among the tables welcoming us individually. My fears began to subside and I felt warm and safe. Not only was I part of an entire group of preservice teachers, but I also had my own little quadrad to which I belonged.

Our room hardly resembled a typical college classroom. Colorful posters decorated the walls, tables were arranged in groups, small flower pots bloomed with tootsie pops, and Cabbage Patch dolls surveyed the entire scene. I began feeling really important. Someone spent a lot of time decorating this classroom and preparing for this moment. I sensed excitement and anticipation in the air. Our instructors were relaxed yet businesslike. I knew I was in the right spot and did not need to worry. I belonged.

Our instructors wasted no time. An assignment on the board waited to be tackled: As a teacher, what will you do during the first ten minutes of the first day

of school? All I could think of was smile big. As I hoped desperately for a flash of insight, it suddenly dawned on me that our instructors were modeling what the first ten minutes of class should be like. This scene and the atmosphere it created was indelibly imprinted on my mind, and I began dreaming of ways I could recreate this sense of celebration, expectancy, and belonging in my own classroom.

Reflections on Reading

As the course progressed, my understanding of how to conduct the first day of school increased dramatically. I read Wong and Wong's (1998) *The First Days of School* and began to believe that the first day of the school year should be a celebration. I liked his idea of banners welcoming students to school and using a band to create a festive air. I want to make the first day of school an enjoyable event, something students anticipate rather than dread.

I was surprised to read that my actions as a teacher on the first day of school set the tone and determine my success for the rest of the school year (Wong & Wong, 1998). I could hardly believe that I would "either win or lose [my] class on the first days of school" (Wong & Wong, 1998, p. 3). How frightening to realize that this short period of time is so instrumental in shaping the entire school year! How ironic that on my first day of teaching when I will feel the most nervous and unsure of myself, I need to concentrate on winning over my students. The first encounter I have with my students is like a permanent marker written in their memories.

I determined to create an atmosphere that gives students a sense of safety, security, and is conducive to learning. I will be calm and let students know that I am the one in charge of my classroom. It is crucial that I begin school with a positive attitude and have high expectations for my students. The more I expect of them, the better they will perform. My goal is to help students feel comfortable in their new

environment. As a teacher, I have one of the most important jobs in the world because I was "hired to affect lives . . . not so much to teach third grade, history, or physical education" (Wong & Wong, 1998, p. 7).

While I found *The First Days of School* incredibly practical, easy to read, and informative, I was shocked and angered when I read that "education should be challenging, exciting, engrossing, and thought-provoking, but not fun" (Wong & Wong, 1998, p. 3). I recognize that Wong and Wong have a lot of experience under their belts, but I vividly remember my third grade teacher because she made school fun. School is a serious place, where learning is the primary focus, no question about that, but education does not need to be dull. I do not believe that education should be portrayed as a party, but it should contain the elements of a party including anticipation, excitement, and growth of relationships. In reflecting on my education, I learned the most from teachers who made education fun.

I have mixed feelings about an article I read by Brooks (1985b) in *Educational Leadership*. He talks about the questions students have on the first day of school, and he outlines specific activities, how they should be sequenced on the first day of school, and specific suggestions for conducting the class in a businesslike manner. To my surprise I read that "superstar" teachers did not use mixers or a game that helped students get to know each other during the first day of school (Brooks, 1985b, p. 77). In my opinion this type of activity acquaints students with each other in a way that is comfortable and sets a friendly environment. I feel it is important to do such an activity to make the students feel welcome and more secure in the classroom. It also helps to build a cooperative environment by helping the students get to know each other. I think the People Hunt we did during the First Days of School Experience and the resulting impact on our class supports this belief.

Preparing for the First Day

I was eager to actually prepare for and experience the first days of school with my cooperating teacher. I was overwhelmed and amazed by the amount of work to do at the beginning of the school year to greet students with the message of "Glad to have you here." Like Wong and Wong (1998) suggest, my cooperating teacher decorates the room but leaves space to exhibit students' work. By Back-to-School night, students will have work to display and the bulletin boards will miraculously be covered. I was a bit surprised when my cooperating teacher was willing to let me arrange the desks. Even more surprising was the amount of time it took to actually arrange the classroom satisfactorily.

My cooperating teacher showed me a copy of the note he had already sent to students and their guardians. The students' note described the first day of school activities and welcomed them to our class. The note to students' guardians acquainted them with plans, rules, and procedures for the entire school year. My cooperating teacher also showed me his classroom management plan which he reviewed and revised before the beginning of each school year. Now I understood why my university instructors required me to devise my own management plan during this course.

As a student I viewed in-service meetings as some secret rite before school started. After attending one, I now see they are designed to help the school year begin more smoothly. While teachers discussed school policies and curriculum, they also joked and talked about personal things. I was tremendously impressed with their willingness to compromise and work together. Everyone became involved by volunteering time for various projects. Since our school had just acquired a new language arts program, we also attended a workshop to learn about the program. I found the textbooks, assessment procedures, and supplementary

learning materials overwhelming. There are thousands of ideas in the teacher's edition. If I were a new teacher coming into this system, I would be totally bewildered and discouraged. With these experiences, however, the big mysteries of teaching began to slowly disappear.

In my make-believe teacher world, I thought all I would have to do for the first day of school was decorate bulletin boards and arrange desks. I never imagined I'd be counting up the exact number of minutes students would be in school, or piloting books for some company, or determining expenditures for students' books. I became aware that teaching is an immense job. I now see the teaching profession in a new light; the teacher's role is complex and multifaceted.

D-Day

As I arrived for the first day of school, my emotions were a mixture of excitement and nervousness. I had been a student for so long and now I was a teacher. When the students arrived with their expressions of excitement and uncertainty, I knew it was going to be a good day. My cooperating teacher and I greeted the students as they entered our classroom. I realized the importance of classroom preparation as I observed students scanning the classroom and commenting about it before taking their assigned seats. Students seem to notice everything. There were directions on the board to let students know where to put their supplies. Students also had an individual assignment to do at their desks during the first ten minutes. This kept them busy and allowed us to make good use of every minute we had.

Both my cooperating teacher and I introduced ourselves to the students. I noticed that both of us were able to make connections between our lives and our students' lives. My cooperating teacher then discussed and practiced procedures and

routines which are part of his management plan. From this discussion we moved to various learning activities. His humor and enthusiasm created a positive attitude. I believe his openness and honesty with students will help him manage the classroom throughout the year, and I was impressed with the supportive learning environment he established. At the end of the day, my cooperating teacher commented that he was able to accomplish only four of the activities he had planned. I concluded that the first day could be a nightmare if a teacher was not prepared. I immediately determined to plan, PLAN, and OVERPLAN!

As I dream of standing in front of my own classroom next year, I am convinced that I will experience a great deal of anxiety on the first day of classes. I suppose I will wonder what things are in store for my class and me during the year and staying calm is a great tool to use in conquering my fears. Because I have journeyed with my cooperating teacher in preparing for and experiencing the first day of school, I know how to prepare for it. Of course I have no way of predicting my setting, but at least I have a plan. I have obtained valuable skills that will make my first days in the classroom a time to look forward to rather than a time to dread.

Coda

Preservice and beginning teachers deserve to know how to prepare for the most important day of their careers. Failing to give them the tools they need is doing them and their students a disservice. "Teaching is the only profession where the beginner is expected to do what the veteran does and with equal success" (Bosch & Kersey, 1994, p. 16). In the business world newcomers are trained before assuming full responsibility; beginning teachers, on the other hand, "must perform the full complement of [teaching] duties while trying to learn those duties" (Wong & Wong, 1998, p. 13). This practice is like "asking a pilot to learn how to fly while taking a

planeload of passengers up for the first time. That would be ludicrous in the airline industry, and the public would never tolerate it; yet that is the prevailing practice in education" (Wong & Wong, 1991, p. 17). Isn't it time to restore the experiences of beginning teachers?

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